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Destroying Angel

BY ERIC CAMERON

SOMETIMES I wonder if memories of an event tend to change, or if it is that people change over the years? It might even be that the memories themselves change people a little. Like the memory of what happened to my brother, Ernest.

It had been bad enough having an older brother, but to have one I forever had to protect from the bullying of other boys was a humiliating burden. Ernest was three years older and so much bigger, yet he followed me everywhere. My mother explained that while his sturdy body had developed normally, Ernest's mind had lagged. Anguish and remorse accentuated the lines in her face, as if she blamed herself for his condition.

"What'll happen to Emie when he gets big like Dad?" I asked when I was twelve years old. "Won't he ever learn to read and write?"

Mother shook her head and sighed.

"Will I always have to mind Emie when he's grown up?" I asked anxiously.

"You'll have to decide that for yourself when the time comes, Paul."

There were so many occasions when I felt ashamed of being seen with Ernest; sometimes he embarrassed me so much I could have struck him dead. He did things impulsively, without thinking, and it was sheer waste of time and words to scold him. As words scattered around him like pebbles, Ernest would smile vaguely and give a helpless little shrug.



One day, I overheard a woman visitor say to mother: "Ernest is such a handsome boy. It's a pity that Paul couldn't have had the looks instead."

After that, whenever I looked in the mirror the acid of envy etched her words deeper. I suspected that when people made comparisons between me and my older brother, they concluded that my weak face should have been matched with Ernest's weak mind.

The easiest way to exact obedience from my older brother was to promise to read to him. Ernest would listen as rapily to a problem from my arithmetic book as to any boys' adventure story. If it was a problem about the five juicy apples that a boy named Harry wanted to divide equally with two of his friends, Ernest would lick his lips as if he could taste the apples. One evening, I read him a new problem about a boy who rode his bicycle for one mile due west, three-quarters of a mile north, six hundred yards east, and one-third of a mile southeast. The boy's name happened to be Ernest, and you had to work out how many feet he traveled on the bicycle. It became Ernest's favorite story and I had to read it so often I began to detest it. The fact that I was utterly incapable of calculating the precise distance the boy had traveled might also have influenced my attitude.

The story was what aroused Ernest's interest in bicycles, an interest that became a passion. So much so that he took possession of any bicycle he saw without a rider and tried to wheel it away.

Finally, after a number of embarrassments, my father decided that the best solution would be to let Ernest have a secondhand bicycle. My mother feared the worst, as she was convinced that Ernest would kill himself if he ever mastered the art of riding a bicycle. I had been secretly hoping for a bicycle for my birthday, and my parents had hinted at one. But they talked to me about Ernest and asked to be patient for another year. There was no point in trying to raise objections once my father had made up his mind about something, and I knew that because the mill was on part time he couldn't afford two bicycles. They reasoned that if they gave me the bicycle Ernest would be always trying to take it. I accepted with a casual shrug that camouflaged a cancer of jealousy which began from that moment to gnaw at me. There was one consolation in the prospect. If Ernest was on a bicycle they couldn't expect me to be his constant shepherd.

"How will Paul be able to keep track of Ernest if he's on a bicycle?" my mother asked, destroying my blooming hope of liberation.

"I've got that problem figured out," my father answered with a smile. "We'll just take off the chain, then lower the seat so he can touch the ground with his feet and push himself around."

"Like a kiddy-car," I observed with bitter satisfaction.

"Well, more or less," he said, avoiding mother's stricken look. I have excruciating memories of that summer when there was no classroom to free me from the dawn-to-dark humiliation of minding my good-looking, good-for-nothing brother. Every time that some boy yelled "Hey—here comes Screwloose Saunders!" my stomach clenched as tight as my fists. I must have been the only boy in town who actually looked forward to the end of summer vacations.

As time went on, I noted with mounting apprehension that Ernest seemed to be growing more headstrong; it was as if the bicycle had given him a certain freedom he had not been aware of before. I was apprehensive because it meant that instead of obeying my grumpy commands, he might one day suddenly challenge my authority and refuse to do what I had ordered. He was so much stronger than I if he ever lost his fear of me he would become his own master. But not quite. He might become stubborn but he would never be able to decide things for himself, never be able to avoid getting into trouble. And so my burden would only grow heavier, for his welfare was my responsibility. Mother steadfastly refused to have Ernest "put away" somewhere.

The thought was a chilling one for me when I heard my father suggest it to her one sultry evening as they sat on the porch swing, holding hands, her head on his shoulder and his heavily muscled arm around her shoulders. The expression "put away" brought to mind the death chamber behind the police station, which consisted of a large packing box with a length of hose that policemen slipped over the exhaust pipe of a car whenever they had to "put away" a stray dog or cat. I wasn't surprised when mother objected that under no circumstances was Ernest to be "put away."

I had crept around in the dark from the garden, stalking a firefly that Ernest had begged me to capture and put in a Mason jar. Seeing my parents sitting on the swing like the Wilson girl

next door and her bank clerk boy friend was a surprise. When my father leaned down and brushed his lips on the top of my mother's head, my throat tightened and through wet eyelids I saw the blurry light of the firefly go flickering across the lawn. Giving a loud, warning cough, I raced in pursuit. When I carried the jar to our bedroom, Ernie stayed awake half the night watching the firefly and I regretted my generous impulse.

It was the bicycle that exasperated me most, and I began to wish that somebody would steal it; but it was too old, too battered, too rusty for anyone to bother with. One day Ernest discovered a hill. As the bicycle picked up speed, he laughed helplessly the way he did when we wrestled and I tickled him to break his hold on me. The hill provided a temporary respite for me. I stretched out in the shade of a tree and watched the wind sculpture the massed cloud banks into ever-changing shapes as they drifted majestically across the sky. Ernest would swoop happily down the hill and I could follow his course without looking, because the bicycle squeaked in spite of frequent oilings. Then he would trudge slowly up to the top and repeat the descent again and again.

One afternoon I was fascinated by a squirrel stalking a bird's nest when the screech of tortured tires was followed by a clang of metal against metal. As goose pimples crawled over me, I strained to hear, but was afraid to look because I was overwhelmed by a surge of guilt and remorse. In that moment I had been aware of a feeling of secret relief, as if something had parted the chain binding me to Ernest.

But my brother had not been killed. Apart from a slight cut on the forehead and a grazed elbow he was unscathed. The bicycle, however, was jammed under the front of the coal truck it had rammed. When the truck driver pronounced it mangled beyond repair I had to restrain my enthusiasm because Ernest wept bitterly.

After trying in vain for a week to get the wreck to go again, Ernest in a frenzy of rage and despair picked up the bicycle and hurled it over the back fence. It narrowly missed Mrs. Dawson who was bent over weeding her vegetable patches.

Minutes later, the bicycle sailed back impelled by Mr. Dawson, a huge, beetle-browed railroad brakeman with tobacco-stained teeth and a carpet of red hair on his barrel chest. Hair curled from his ears and nose like tangled rusty wire and even his broad

back was liberally forested. He bellowed a warning that Ernest would be torn limb from limb if he ever tried any more crazy stunts. The twisted skeleton of the bicycle rusted all summer until the energetic weeds concealed it from view. There were times when I was tempted to heave the wreck back into the Dawsons' yard just to see if that ferocious man might carry out his threat. In a book of children's stories there was an illustration for the Jack the Giant Killer tale, of a scowling, snaggle-toothed giant with red hair that Ernest called Mr. Dawson. He avoided looking at it and I could paralyze him with dread simply by chanting in a deep voice: "Fe, fo, fi, fum . . . Mr. Dawson's going to come!"

The winter I remember most vividly had suddenly collapsed into spring, and mild weather bearded the eaves of every roof with icicles. On a Saturday afternoon when the school rink was too soft for hockey, I decided to walk out of town along the tracks to the railroad bridge. It spanned the river where it narrowed to a steep gorge and plunged down in a series of almost vertical steps. The ice formations would be striking to see, particularly if any of them thawed enough to break free and thundered down on the rocks. Ernest, as usual, was as inseparable as my shadow.

It was a brilliant, windless day; everything seemed to be standing still in anticipation of spring's arrival. I balanced on one of the rails, pretending I was a performer on the circus high wire, working without a safety net, concentrating on keeping my footing and holding my arms out. Every time I lost my balance I could imagine the gasp of horror from the spectators who breathed as one, and I saw the white mass of tilted faces whirling up to meet me as I tumbled down to the sawdust ring.

When we came to a short tunnel through a hill, Ernest wanted to detour around it. He was frightened of the unseen terrors in its gloomy, dripping depths. It had a sooty, cindery smell that made you feel you wanted to sneeze.

"Stop being such a big baby," I snapped impatiently. Clutching my hand, Ernest stumbled after me into the dark

and I half-hoped a train would catch us in the tunnel and really give him something to fear. The prospect of yet another summer as his daily keeper made me cranky and morose. I gave a shout and echoes boomed along the tunnel.

A vague, black form suddenly hovered before us and then disappeared. Ernest whimpered in fear as we hurried on through the tunnel toward the patch of light that was the other end. The

out of the shadows like a wraith of smoke. Amid the boulders along the river's edge, weathered branches and roots of felled trees thrust up through the snow like the bones of decayed prehistoric monsters. The owl alighted on a branch about three feet above the snow and we scrambled as quietly as we could down the bank. From downstream came the muted roar of the falls and a cloud of vapor hung in the sky like the breath of a snoring giant.

Under the lee of a boulder I found two stones the size of tennis balls. I wanted to stun the owl and capture it before it decided to escape across the river, where we could not follow because the sun had rotted the river ice and in places it sagged ominously, forming glistening pools.

My second throw struck the bird's breast. Wings flailing helplessly, it tumbled backward off its perch. We dashed forward, slipping and falling on the ice-coated rocks and driftwood. The owl scuttled out on the river ice, sculling on the clear, wind-swept surface with its broad wings. It no longer seemed able to support itself in the air. A twisted ankle and bruised elbow had dampened my enthusiasm, but Ernest's had reached fever-pitch. Snatching up a length of driftwood, he ran out on the ice in pursuit of the fleeing bird, slipping and slithering, blind to the dangers.

Ernest hurled the club. By some fluke it struck the bird's injured wing and knocked it over. As he threw himself upon the fluttering mass of plumage, I felt a pang of jealousy that Ernest had succeeded where I had failed. The glory of the triumphant march through town would be his.

Suddenly Ernest screamed . . . a long-drawn howl of pain and terror that rooted me to the rock I was perched on. Lurching to his feet, he began to stagger around drunkenly on the water-slicked ice, trying vainly to free himself from the hooked talons sunk into his face. The fluttering wings resembled the head-dance of a tribal medicine man engaged in some weird ritual dance of supplication to the gods.

"Paul! Paul!" was the only word my brother screamed, the word that had always summoned help when he had needed it. But I was bound to the shore by a knot of fear that tightened as Ernest bobbed and turned in the grotesque ballet.

With a slushy groan, the ice under Ernest sagged lower and lower. Unable to scramble up the saucerlike incline, he sprawled

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shape rose before us once more and huge wings seemed to stretch right across the tunnel, yet there was no sound but of our breathing and crunching footsteps. I remembered a book at my grandmother's that contained an illustration of an angel with fiery sword, hovering over some cowering people. She had called him "The Destroying Angel." Whatever it was had been much too big to be a bat; in any case, I knew that bats hibernated during the cold weather.

"Was it a ghost?" Ernest quavered, blinking in the sun when we left the coffin-like confines of the tunnel.

"Don't be stupid," I snapped, angry with myself for having succumbed to fear.

As we walked on down the tracks, Ernest kept glancing anxiously behind as if he thought something might be following us. He made me so nervous I thought there was something flitting among the trees lining the right of way. Ernest tripped over a switchplate and went sprawling, but quickly jumped up with an apologetic laugh. Then he froze, his eyes widening as he stared beyond me. He pointed to a fat birch tree about fifty feet distant. On a branch close to the trunk was the biggest bird I had ever seen. The snow owl's great wings unfolded like sails and made lazy, silent sweeps. After a hundred yards, the effortless movement of the six-foot wings seemed to falter. The owl staggered, then alighted as gently as a huge snowflake on a drift. When we drew near it again took flight. There was something uncanny about the utter silence of its movements, and I realized that the bird was what had frightened us in the tunnel.

The owl made shorter flights, as if its strength was ebbing. When it rested on a fence post, I noticed that one wing dropped and the pinions were streaked with dried blood. Someone had crippled it with a gunshot. Unless the wing mended very soon the bird would die of hunger or be finished off by some other predator. I began to visualize Ernest and myself walking through town holding the great owl by its wingtips, drawing curious looks and comments. The Weekly Clarion might even publish a picture!

Ernest shivered with excitement as we stalked the owl to the top of the steep, forested river bank. The owl's expressionless, unblinking black eyes never strayed from us and the fierce scimitar of beak suggested caution. Just when I had gathered myself for a sudden rush and capture, the owl's wings rose and fell and it went sailing down through the trees, ghosting in and

on his knees in the rapidly rising water, tearing at the owl. When the ice parted like the jaws of a whale, Ernest was sucked down into the greedy, swirling black water with a faint, despairing cry. The owl's wings flailed the surface, then vanished. Only the water gurgled with an evil, chuckling sound.

The moment began to fill with a sense of sadness and departure and a frightened melancholy bloomed inside me. And then, as I turned away from the ominous hole in the ice, I was suddenly swept with a great feeling of freedom and liberation, as if a dark fungus growth compounded of accumulated shame, resentment and jealousy had been excised from my mind.

But the rapture of release was short-lived. As I climbed the river bank, the bare branches of the somber trees ticked softly in a slight wind that had sprung up, like the whispering voices of those who might ask what I had done to try and save my brother. I had a chilling vision of Ernest and the snow owl, locked in their everlasting embrace, being swept over the boiling falls to the jagged rocks below. I began to run.

By the time I reached the railroad tunnel, the sun had gone and soft snowflakes sifted from the leaden sky. When I was a few yards from the tunnel entrance, a snow owl suddenly swept out from its throat and sailed over me without a sound, so low that I could have reached up and touched it. As it melted into the gloomy woods, I wondered, trembling, if it had been an apparition.

Somehow, the memory of Ernest's tragedy became associated in my mind with the picture of "The Destroying Angel." In time, I believed that perhaps the strange bird had performed an act of mercy, savage though it was. For after all, what would life have been like for Ernest if he had grown up? I never saw another snow owl in our region, and when I told people what had happened I began to sense that they thought I was imagining that part of the incident. They knew that Ernest had not been "all there" so naturally they came to certain conclusions, one being that what ran in the family ran in the family. Years later I was relieved to have a wildlife expert suggest that the owls probably had been a pair driven south by a shortage of food.

My parents never held me responsible for what happened. In fact, my mother maintained that it wouldn't have happened if Ernest had heeded my warning about the dangerous state of the ice. When I awake in the still of the night and lie there in the dark,

remembering that moment in every detail, I recall having warned him about the ice. At first I didn't remember, but as time went on the memory became clearer. In the excitement, I suppose I wasn't aware of having tried to restrain Ernest from venturing after the owl. They say it's the same with car accidents; the witnesses don't always recall precisely what happened until someone jogs their memory. And if my mother believed that I had tried to stop Ernest, then I must have. It makes me feel a little better to remember it that way.